

Florian Schneider, **China's Digital Nationalism**, New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2018, 318 pp., \$99.00 (hardcover), \$29.13 (paperback).

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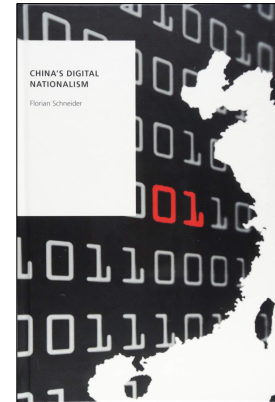
Florian Schneider's *China's Digital Nationalism* focuses on an important, but understudied, development. There are many separate literatures for digital spheres and nationalism, but not many researchers explore what happens when nationalism and digital technologies interact. However, increasingly, such interactions occur. So, an update of our understanding of nations and nationalism in a digital era is needed.

China's Digital Nationalism analyzes digital China by empirically examining search engines, hyperlink networks, and social media. Schneider focuses on two cases: the Nanjing Massacre of 1937–1938 and current disputes over islands in the East China Sea. He analyzes different digital spheres and concludes that under the Chinese authority's cultural governance approach, the digital spheres in China are integrated into the mass-media model of communication, which strengthens the Chinese state.

Media and communications studies are the central research concerns here, but Schneider also draws on area studies, political science, psychology, and sociology. A two-step approach is used to collect data: Traditional qualitative analyses are augmented with innovative digital methods. Discourse analysis also is employed to further analyze the data.

After a brief introduction, Schneider turns to nationalism and the scholarship on nationalism in China. Nationalism is considered in the context of modernity and nation states. Modernity is explained as a set of organizational principles and technologies (p. 33). Nation states are the political technology at the core of modernity. National governments enable large-scale social cooperation (pp. 31–32). The formation of nation states helped arrange the complexity of social life, but the process is not and should not be considered natural. In Benedict Anderson's (2006), *Imagined Communities*, the nation state is used as an example of an imagined community. The media is essential in creating these imagined communities. Members require a collective framework of meaning to recognize each other, including a collection of corporate values and symbols, while mass media spreads the messages and creates collective symbols. The attachment or group loyalty to the nation state is defined as nationalism (p. 34), the fundamental driver behind the nation state. In contemporary Chinese nationalism, this is reflected in elite attempts to use mass communication technologies to create an imagined community, which is China as a nation state (p. 53).

China's Internet environment is unique. As ICT evolves, the industrial era is giving way to the "digital age" (p. 33). In China, by contrast, the development of ICT technologies is complex and involves seemingly contradictory policy choices (p. 9). China designated ICTs as one of the "pillar industries," and people are encouraged to innovate in the area of "Internet Plus." The importance of ICT technology in



China's national strategy is demonstrated by the government's attitude toward Huawei and 5G technologies. Even as Chinese authorities encourage new technologies, they closely monitor, guide, censor, and often directly engineer the information made available on the Internet. To this end, in 2011, China's Central State Internet Information Office (Guojia hulianwang xinxi banongshi 国家互联网信息办公室) was established. These conflicting policy choices make China's digital world especially ripe for study. And, since China's Internet is closed to most global Internet giants, most Chinese digital products are developed and used domestically. As a result, domestic and local Internet giants emerged, making it easier for the authorities to manage information and the Internet.

Next, Schneider presents empirical research on Chinese search engines and the online network of Chinese websites to explain how information is organized on the Chinese web. Search engines are the gateways to digital networks. To narrow the task, he concentrates on Japan, an important foreign "other" for the Chinese. Japan is used as the main foil for researching contemporary Chinese nationalism (p. 3). Schneider's examination of search engine results about Japan finds that they yield skewed knowledge about Japan. Chinese programmers created a digital bias algorithmically. Reason for this bias included state interventions, China's political economy, technical structures, and the psychology of users. Schneider found that websites on Sino-Japanese issues resemble traditional archives and largely lack an interactive information hub. China's Internet serves as a vast laboratory in which to brew digital nationalism.

Schneider then provides a multidisciplinary examination of the 1937 Nanjing Massacre and the ongoing East China Sea dispute. Both case studies are consistent with the CCP's official narratives. Little is left for discussion. The online history of the Nanjing Massacre is more a shrine than a forum. The Diaoyu Island issue is more dynamic but still does not break from the traditional mass-media system. Most of the content on the site reproduces official mainstream narratives. Schneider's analysis of social media shows more diverse, dynamic, and far-reaching discussions. However, the design choices made by Chinese Internet giants structure how diverse views can be expressed and sets limits on discourse on these national issues. Technologies empower users, but not all users are empowered equally. In addition, the party's governance mechanisms follow the rules of mass media. A few professional media experts launch the vast majority of messages aimed at information consumers. In short, both cases illustrate how Chinese digital nationalism is cultivated artificially.

The penultimate chapter steps away from the cases and undertakes a broader examination of the information and communication governance in China. In summary, the Chinese government's cultural governance approach is that a small number of media organizations deliver information for the mass majority. Finally, the conclusion turns to imagined communities and networked societies. The main argument is that ICTs updated the way people attached themselves to imagined communities and related institutions.

This volume shines a spotlight on Chinese digital nationalism and more generally on the social and political implications of digital communication. Schneider explains misconceptions about digital communications through the two case studies. First, diverse meaning making through digital media does not guarantee that the public sphere will be constituted. The second misconception is that social media can empower the bottom to rise against the elite. This has not happened in China, but the impact of digital

communication needs to be studied in context. Still, stakeholders, especially those that can shape the discourses, need consideration.

Schneider opens a window for analyzing Chinese digital nationalism. For example, his analyses of Chinese Internet search engines and the hyperlink network are like the bones of a body. They lay out the structure of China's Internet and show how information and content on the Internet are connected. These chapters provide an excellent introduction to the Chinese Internet and lay a grounding for what follows. They also are closely intertwined with the cultural governance of digital China and explain how the Chinese government implemented its policy. In addition, Schneider traces the nationalist discourse across various digital spheres and between China and Japan.

Overall, Schneider analyzes various digital spheres of the Chinese Internet. His detailed volume and the excellent use of different methods provide an important discourse analysis for online spheres. Still, three observations need consideration. First, Schneider justifies the Japan-China analysis by stating that Japan is the most important "other" for China. But, in the daily online discussion and conversation of Chinese nationalism, Japan appears infrequently. And, as Japan fades to the background, other topics are gaining priority. Now, with the growth of China's economy and its growing importance globally, the Chinese self-image of how it relates to other countries has changed. For example, in mid-November 2018, the Italian fashion brand Dolce & Gabbana released three short videos that provoked a backlash from Chinese consumers, celebrities, media, and even the government because of its disrespectful, racist, sexist, and stereotypical messages about the Chinese. Celebrities refused to attend the Shanghai show and rebuked the brand publicly on Weibo, which led to the cancellation of the show. Retailers dumped D&G products, and online sites pulled D&G products from their websites, creating a huge brand crisis. The Internet made it easy to quickly launch a boycott alliance. In this instance, nationalism triumphed over consumerism. D&G's brand crisis illuminates how China's digital nationalism, fueled by the power of the Internet, was a phenomenon beyond the company's experience. This example reflects increasing national pride and people's attitudes toward foreign brands, which have become an important part of China's digital nationalism.

Second, a meaningful discussion of Xi's leadership is absent despite the significant evolution of Xi's leadership position during his tenure. As China's paramount leader, he champions Chinese nationalism. Under his lead, Chinese nationalism has become intertwined with people's and the nation's Chinese dream. More attention to this aspect of Chinese digital nationalism would have reinforced the argument.

A third, broader issue is the author's framework. Nation-state theories are established and applied mainly in the Western world, which does not perfectly match China's development as a nation. Also, the underlying modernity theory, Eurocentrism, should be considered in the context of China. Yet, Schneider never explains why specific modernity and nation-state theories should be applied to the Chinese case.

Reference

Anderson, B. (2006). *Imagined communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism* (Rev. ed.). London, UK: Verso.